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ABSTRACT

A study was done of the efficacy of Project Reach, an alternative school program for seriously at-risk students attending the Socorro High School in the Socorro Independent School District (Texas). Program participants were those who had reached the pre-expulsion stage prior to admission. The program goals were to prevent dropouts or expulsions and to facilitate the reintegration of students into mainstream programs. Data for the evaluation of academic and administrative aspects of the project were gathered from the project proposal, classroom observations, attendance at special events such as plays, interviews with project staff, and analyses of internal evaluation data. The program served 7th through 12th graders with a self-concept development approach somewhat like a "Tough Love" or "Boot Camp" strategy. Traditional curriculum was delivered by computers linked to a satellite network; and the balance of the day was spent on health and drug education, drama, and personal log writing. Evaluation found dramatic improvements in student retention and reclamation from 1990 to 1992, and in student perceptions of program helpfulness, increased academic achievement, and increased self-respect. Suggestions for program enhancement and future research are included. (JB)

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Retaining Hispanic Youth in School: An Evaluation of A Counseling-Based Alternative School Program

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Abstract

An alternative school program for at-risk students, Project Reach, who had reached the final stage prior to expulsion from school, was assessed. Funded from several state and federal sources, the project curriculum was a blend of group therapy, health education, drama, and computer assisted instruction. The goal of the program was to (1) prevent drop-outs, and/or expulsions, and (2) facilitate the reintegration of students into mainstream programs. The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the program's strategy. Suggestions for program development and research agendas are included.

Descriptors: Alternative programs, At-risk students, Counseling

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Introduction

This paper reports on Project Reach, an alternative school program for seriously at-risk students, who had reached the pre-expulsion stage prior to admission to this program. Initiated by the faculty and administration of Socorro, Independent School District, Texas, the goal of the program was to (1) prevent drop-outs, and/or expulsions, and (2) facilitate the reintegration of students into mainstream programs. The purpose of this study was to assess the efficacy of the program's counseling based strategy. Conclusions and recommendations regarding the program will be discussed. Implications for the at-risk research agenda are also discussed.

Data for this paper were gathered from the project proposal, classroom observations, attendance at special events such as plays, interviews with project staff, and analysis of internal evaluation data. The report covers the academic and administrative aspects of the project. The report does not cover financial, legal areas, or central office implementation of administrative aspects of the project. The assistance and openness of Project Reach staff, the school site administrators, and of Project Co-directors, Mitch Ferguson, and Keith McCellan is appreciated.

The Setting

Project Reach is located in Socorro High School, and is an alternative school within a school. Socorro High is the elder of the two high schools in Socorro Independent School District. The district is a transitional area east of El Paso, Texas, which was rural but is rapidly becoming suburban in its northern areas. Even with suburbanization, the district remains approximately 95% Hispanic and has a median family income of approximately $15,000.

Prior to surbanization, the only population in the district was in the Rio Grande river valley where irrigated agriculture has been feasible for many years. This area consisted of the small town of Socorro and farmsteads until, in the last quarter century, small scale developers began selling lots without water or sewer. The buyers of these lots were largely lower income Hispanics who often build their own homes on a cash basis. Consequently, "colonia" conditions emerged. Colonias are Mexican suburban communities lacking in water, sewer, paved roads and other amenities. Certain US - Mexican border communities are also called colonias when they are more typical of Mexico than of the United States.

Although one might expect such conditions to result in hopelessness, a previous study of this large high school (n=3000 plus) has shown a remarkable 84% holding power; i.e., 84% of entering 9th graders either graduate on time or continue enrollment into a fifth year of study (Klingstedt, 1989.)

It should be noted that the faculty and administration of Socorro Independent School District, under the leadership of Dr. Jerry Barber, are ready, willing, and able to try new approaches. Rather than worry that something might not work out, the Socorro team understands that one learns from successes and failures, and failures in innovation can and will be overcome in the next program revision.

Project Reach

In spite of other successes, the school faced an important population of severely at-risk students, including gang members and substance abusers. Project Reach was designed, implemented, and redesigned for this population. The second year of this program became the subject of this evaluation. The first year of the project was funded by traditional sources. A grant from the Governor's task force on substance abuse (Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse - TCADA) began with the second year, adding $180,000 in new resources and several staff members, including a counselor and a social worker. In addition, the project curriculum was refined and enriched.

Although the program was housed on the high school campus, program hours were non-traditional. The day began at 11 a.m. and extended into the early evening. A summer program was also provided. Admission into the program was for an indeterminate period. Several stages were set up in the program and when the student had progressed through all stages, readmission to the mainstream occurred. The pace of student progress was completely individualized.

The psychological part of the program was based on materials developed by Craig and Michele Borba aiming at self concept development. The approach could be described as a bit like a "Tough Love" or a "Boot Camp" strategy. The traditional curriculum was delivered on MacIntosch computers linked to the Nova-NET satellite network. The balance of the day featured health and drug education, drama, and a large amount of personal log writing.

Participants ranged from upper elementary through high school grades, although age levels were restricted to the normal range of grade 7 and up. All participants had a history of difficulty in school. Often, participants had multiple problems, including gang membership. A majority had been sexually abused and had poor role models at home. Of those admitted for multiple reasons, 80% involved gang activity, and another 80% substance abuse. These two groups were not isomorphic, i.e., were not always the same people.

Table 1

During the 1991-1992 period, specific reasons for admission to Project Reach were as follows:

Truancy, or "ditching"	20%
Fighting	20%
Gang involvement	17%
Multiple reasons	17%
Socialization skills deficits	13%
Substance abuse	10%
Voluntary admissions	3%

Results

It should be emphasized that Project Reach is aimed at the hard core of at-risk students: pre-expulsion students who are in serious trouble. The project aims to accomplish much more than merely holding students; it has therapeutic aspirations and aims at a broad and general reclamation of people who may seem doomed. Due to the serious problems of the clientele, and because this report covers the first year of the project in its present form one would normally expect something less than perfection.

As it happens, the project was a success. It was a success to the point that the research agenda can more from what makes someone become at-risk to what works for formerly at-risk students. It is this opportunity motivated this author to propose this paper and is motivating current investigations.

The progress in student retention and reclamation, at least on a short term, from 1990-1991 to 1991-1992 could hardly be more dramatic. (Table 2)

Table 2

Reach 1990 - 1991		Reach 1991 - 1992	
Enrollment	250	Enrollment	412
Exit to mainstream	4	Exit to mainstream	382
Retained in program	36	Retained in program	18
Expelled	210	Expelled	12
84% annual attrition rate		2.9% annual attrition rate	

This improvement shown in Table 2 was reflected in periodic student survey of opinion. A sampling of the results of the late Spring, 1992 administration of that survey are in Table 3.

Table 3

Almost 86% of the students report that the program is helpful or very helpful:

	N	%
Not helpful	4	5.6
Little help	4	5.6
Somewhat helpful	15	21.1
Helpful	27	38.0
Very helpful	19	26.8
TOTAL	69	97.2

Approximately 76% report better grades:

	N	%
No change	7	9.9
Improved a little	16	22.5
Improved	38	53.5
Got somewhat worse	7	9.9
Got worse	2	2.8
TOTAL	70	98.6

About 94% of students report that they "act" better in this program:

	N	%
No change	3	4.2
Improved a little	13	18.3
Improved	47	66.2
Got somewhat worse	4	5.6
Got worse	3	4.2
TOTAL	70	98.6

Progress in self respect was reported by more than 77% of the students.

	N	%
Not at all	3	4.2
Seldom	10	14.1
Some of the time	17	23.9
Most of the time	16	22.5
All of the time	22	31.0
TOTAL	68	95.8

To determine whether length of time in the program affected student opinion a cross tab analysis of all items by length of time in the program was conducted. Generally, length of time in program did not significantly affect opinion. The notable exception was that the longer the student was in the program, the more helpful they though the program was to them.
(Chi Square = 24.8592, df = 16, $p \leq 0.07235$)

Problems identified and reported to the school district involved adequate housing, acceptance by regular school staff, and a few minor administrative issues. The program was housed in a new section of the high school and in portable buildings on the opposite side of the campus. Housing was mentioned in the report because the norm for school facilities is something other than portable buildings. The truth is likely to be that no one really minded because the facilities were roomy and the entire El Paso region has a large number of portable buildings. Housing was not administratively convenient, but students and staff did not mind.

Strengths of the program were its design, staff, and execution. Many staff members came from non traditional backgrounds. Faculty included a drama teacher and a retired major. Most of the rest of the faculty had decided to become teachers after graduating from college and trying other occupations. Not all teachers were fully certified, although most had graduate credit hours. All faculty had some prior experience, however minimal, in assisting people in areas beyond the traditional curriculum. It should be noted that Far West Texas has a continuing teacher shortage.

This was not a media rich program, except for the resources of Nova-NET. By some standards, the program was short of instructional materials. That is, the rooms were relatively bare of books, media materials, laboratory equipment and so forth. But, this situation was exactly typical of nearly all of the schools of Far West Texas, an is one of the reasons that Socorro I.S.D. is among the plaintiffs in the ongoing school finance law suit.

It was recommended by this evaluator that, although students did a great deal of log writing and peer editing, the faculty might consider a logical extension. Increased writing and role play in class could be accomplished by having students can write short play scripts - individually, and/or in pairs. If needed, the scripts could address a pre-agreed upon theme. The scripts could be edited with the assistance of peers and then placed in periodic internal competitions which would lead to production as presentations for a variety of audiences.

It was recommended that the program could be better integrated into the regular program, and the students reentry into the mainstream could be assisted, if a certain project faculty positions were reserved for rotating faculty, i.e. people on sabbatical from mainstream programs. It was also recommended that a precursor program should be created. The clientele in the existing program are really the over-the-hill gang; they are so seriously at risk that it is almost too late. Earlier intervention would help more students, more quickly.

Conclusion

Project Reach is a success. The concept of this program is unique and worthy. The program errs on the side of over ambition, but also produces at a level higher than might be expected.

Future Research and Evaluation Directions

Current practice is to identify students who are at-risk and to develop interventions. Two research avenues need to be pursued with respect to this issue. The first concern is that the at-risk indicators are not locally validated and are likely to be overly broad, or misleading. Of what use, for example, is an indicator that says minority group member are at risk in a district which is majority minority and which has a high retention and completion rate? Of what use is it to label someone at-risk after they have been shot or convicted of a crime? The indicators need to be location specific and need to be aimed at early identification.

The identification of at-risk students cannot be directly helpful in improving positive aspects of school productivity, because identification of at-risk people does not address solutions. Such identification only says that a solution is needed. Neither is the flip side, a very low at-risk rate helpful. One can have a Happy-Air-Head school in which no one drops out and no one learns.

What the profession, in general needs is a positive set of indicators so school leaders will know what makes a positive difference. Rather than base an intervention on what makes one become a drug dealer, positive indicators might permit us to able to learn what made Jaime Escalante successful. That would be a suitable basis for intervention design! It would also be helpful to learn why people like those in Project Reach, who would be on the streets or in jail under other conditions, make progress.

In past, school productivity research seldom asks student directly for affective indicators. Like so much of educational research, data sources have typically been adults giving expert opinion about what causes a student to be at-risk.(Fitzgerald, J. or Frymier, J. and Gansneder B. or Klingstedt, J.L.) Can one go beyond that level and get information from students which relates to this issue?

One can conjecture that, for successful students, school is providing a sense of empowerment and belonging. Which students have that sense? How can this sense be given to other students? Similarly, for former at-risk students, what charged? How can the change be replicated?

The research approach to this area is likely to be a slow search through a wide variety of personal, psychological, and social factors for factors which are effective in identifying how successful and unsuccessful students are similar and different.

To begin the investigation, a questionnaire was developed and field tested in a not-at risk population of 6th graders (n=60). Of these students 96% spoke Spanish in the home, and 40% had been born in Mexico. Based on these results and input from area teachers, the questionnaire has been extensively revised and expanded and will be given this Fall to a stratified sample of non at-risk students, at-risk students, and Project Reach students.

So far the experience has been instructive. It seems valid to say that the anticipation of some results being transportable, while others will be border specific is likely to be correct. But getting the information one really wants is difficult. An example of this sort of difficulty is developing a validated indicator on criminal activity.

During the analysis of the pilot study data it was discovered that 6% (n=3) of the non at-risk sample had been arrested. That seemed shocking and made little sense to the author and teachers involved until the matter of the Border Patrol (La Migra) came up.

We did not want to know about immigration problems. We wanted to know about criminal activities. But, in El Paso, city police and Border Patrol officers ride in the same car! Moreover, the Border Patrol now has drug interdiction duties as well as immigration issues. One can be "arrested" by La Migra for shop lifting or immigration. One can also be arrested" by a city officer shop lifting or immigration. How then, does one develop items which sort out these differences while remaining in language 4th graders understand? One cannot ask if they were ever indicted for a 3rd degree felony!

This line of inquiry is proceeding with the revision and expansion of the questionnaire and a Fall, 1992 administration of the questionnaire to project participants and to a stratified sample of El Paso students.

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